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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CANBERRA 000808

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/09/2015

TAGS: [PTER](#) [PREL](#) [AS](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: AUSTRALIAN HOSTAGE CASE: OUTLOOK BLEAK, NEW PLAYERS

REF: CANBERRA 777

Classified By: Political Counselor Woo Lee for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[11.](#) (C) SUMMARY: Australian government expectations for the release of the first confirmed Australian hostage in Iraq, Douglas Wood, remain low, according to Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) Iraq Task Force Director Bassim Blazey. Prominent Australian Sunni cleric, Sheikh Taj Din al-Hilali, the Mufti of Australia, appealed directly to the kidnappers for Wood's release in a May 7 video broadcast on al-Jazeera. Sheikh al-Hilali is leading a delegation of senior Australian Muslims to Iraq on May 9 in an attempt to negotiate Wood's release. The GOA is satisfied with the cooperation it has received from the Iraqi Transitional Government (ITG), and has appreciated the sensible approach of Wood's Australian family. ITG Vice President Ghazi al Yawar suggested to GOA officials that Wood's kidnappers could be associated with the Zargawi network in Iraq, but the GOA has no independent information that would support that assertion. End Summary.

[12.](#) (C) On May 9, Iraq Task Force Director Blazey told poloffs that the Australian Government remained pessimistic about prospects for the release of Douglas Wood, in part because Wood's health was extremely poor and he could die of natural causes within one to two weeks without the medicines he had been taking. Blazey said the Australian Embassy in Baghdad had a package of drugs ready to pass on to Wood through any interlocutor who might be able to negotiate on his behalf.

[13.](#) (C) A second video released to al-Jazeera on May 7 by the kidnappers demanded that Australia withdraw its troops from Iraq within 72 hours. The video did not make clear, however, when the 72-hour period was to start. According to Blazey, the GOA had also learned that Hassan Zadaan, the controversial Sunni tribal sheikh and former general in Saddam Hussein's army who had been reported in the press as trying to negotiate on Wood's behalf, was in fact not in direct contact with the hostage takers after all.

[14.](#) (U) Meanwhile, the Mufti of Australia, Sunni Sheikh al-Hilali, announced that he would be leading a delegation today to Baghdad to attempt to secure Wood's release. The Mufti had appealed to the kidnappers directly through a May 7 al-Jazeera broadcast and told the Australian press that he had been in touch with Sunni scholars in Iraq. The Sheikh said he was hoping at the very least to obtain a 48-hour extension to the captors' deadline.

[15.](#) (U) Sheikh al-Hilali's statements on al-Jazeera did not support U.S. policy in Iraq, suggesting instead that Wood should be released because he and most Australians disagreed with U.S. policy. "We value your jihad and your efforts and we call upon you to do something for the sake of our community and all Australian society, which does not support (Prime Minister John) Howard's pro-American policies," said al-Hilali to the kidnappers. "You know the Australian forces in Iraq are protected by American forces and don't do anything - it's all politics." Sheikh Hilali told the Australian media that he had explained to the kidnappers that local Muslims understood their desire to liberate their country and make it independent, but that kidnappings reflected poorly on the Islamic community in Australia. Blazey noted that Sheikh al-Hilali had in the past called for the withdrawal of troops from Iraq.

[16.](#) (C) Blazey emphasized that the Sheikh's visit was a private initiative -- the result of his meeting with Wood's brothers at Sydney's Lakemba Mosque. The GOA was not involved in visit planning, although it welcomed any effort that might lead to the Australian's release. Blazey said the Australian Government would be willing to put the Muslim cleric on a C-130 to Baghdad if requested, but that the cleric had so far not asked for GOA support.

[17.](#) (C) Blazey corrected media claims that the Wood family was contemplating paying a ransom. They were, however, considering making conciliatory statements through the media sympathizing with the suffering of Iraqis or donating to a charity, in the hope of inducing Wood's release. The Wood family had been very cooperative and seemed supportive of the government's handling of the case to date, Blazey commented.

[18.](#) (C) Blazey also told us that Trade Minister Mark Vaile,

who had called ITG Prime Minister Ja'fari on May 7 to discuss the problem of off-loading Australian wheat shipments to Iraq, had thanked Ja'fari for the ITG's help in Wood's case. The Australian Emergency Response Team, lead by DFAT Deputy Secretary Nick Warner (reftel), had met with Interior

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Minister Bayan Jabor on May 8 and found him helpful. In a meeting with Vice President Ghazi al Yawar, the team had been told that Wood's kidnappers were associated with the al-Zargawi network. Blazey said, however, that the GOA did not have any other information that tracked with that assertion.

19. (U) Baghdad minimize considered.  
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